A REFORMING FAITH FOR A CHANGING WORLD

May 21, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 7:1-8

"You leave the commandments of God, and hold fast human tradition."
-Mark 7:8 (Inclusive Language Lectionary)

Abraham Lincoln, Grover Cleveland, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower, William Jenning Bryan, Norman Thomas, John Foster Dulles; John Wanamaker, Andrew Mellon, George Westinghouse, Thomas Watson, Frederick Weyerhauser, Louis Severance, Cyrus and Nettie McCormick... McGuffey, whose readers define an era in education, Poet Marianne Moore, Karl Menninger, publishers Gilbert Hovey (National Geographic), Henry R. Luce (Time), DeWitt Wallace (Readers Digest); Justices William O. Douglas and Tom Clark; Generals Stonewall Jackson and George MacClellan; J. Howard Pew and John Glenn and Arnold Palmer and John Dancy and Mr. Rogers and Dean Rusk and Catherine Marshall and Orel Hershiser... all of them intentional Presbyterians, like salt of the earth, leaven in the loaf and on occasion, light in the darkness.

Two hundred years ago today, May 21, 1789, thirty-four Presbyterians met in Philadelphia and decided that they were a national organization... the Presbyterian Church. They represented 420 congregations scattered throughout the new nation and its frontier. Together they were the largest, best educated, most orderly church in the new world. They had a strong sense that they were a part of the new era in world history which was coming to pass with the birth of the American Republic, and so they dated the documents from that meeting, not May 1789, but "In the thirteenth year of the Independence of the United States of America." They had been there from the beginning. Two Presbyterian churches, established in 1640, were already nearly 150 years old in 1789.

Today, May 21, 1989, the 11,600 congregations which comprise the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are remembering that event, observing our Bicentennial as a national church by celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We do so in a world which is radically different and from a posture in the world which has changed radically and is still changing. We are, almost everyone agrees, no longer at the center of things... Last week's Time Magazine featured a major article, "Those Mainline Blues" which explored the phenomenon, is now familiar to all observers of our culture.

The old established churches are declining in real numbers and perhaps influence. Even if you don't agree with the doom-sayers who predict that at the current rate of decline the last Presbyterian will expire sometime in the second decade of the next century... everyone agrees that things are different today from the day a few decades ago when the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church was on the cover of Time and President Eisenhower took time off to help the Presbyterians dedicate a new office building in New York City.

I submit, in a way I hope is not overly parochial, that the role of mainline churches in general and the Presbyterian Church in particular, is critical, worth being concerned about. I also submit that the past can teach us about the future. And so back to the history books because, as Steven Spielberg tantalizingly suggests, it may be "Back to the Future," a future in which there simply must be Presbyterians around to analyze it, challenge it, argue with it, deliberate over it, and celebrate it.

But first the story... It begins in the 16th Century when an exiled French lawyer, a partisan of the Reformation, stopped overnight in Geneva, Switzerland, and was persuaded to remain and reorganize the churches and the city. His name was John Calvin and his radical notion of church, state and the individual included the absolute sovereignty of God and therefore the limited sovereignty of every other authority. Calvin said two things about the individual: one - we are sinners, against which no one has ever successfully argued, and second - that in spite of sin, the conscience of the individual is sacred. People need and should have rights - and also education. Finally, Calvin believed in the intersection of faith and life in the world, in the city streets, marketplace and body politic. Because he understood human nature so honestly, Calvin distrusted all authority and thought that the best guarantee against the abuse of authority was education and a political system of checks and balances.

One of his most ardent disciples was a Scotsman, John Knox, who took Calvin's ideas back to Edinburgh. And as Calvinists always do, he challenged the autocracy and the whole political establishment, including Mary Queen of Scots; and ultimately built those radical Presbyterian ideas into the soul of the nation and the Church of Scotland which is Presbyterian.

They came early to the New World... 1620. The Puritans were English Calvinists, dissenters from church and state. The Scots and Scotch-Irish from Northern Ireland came at the same time and established the Kirks on Long Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware. They brought with them their distrust of authority, but also their notion of God's sovereignty and individual rights, their commitment to education and their intention to put their religion to work in the public sphere, not simply in their sparse, lean and very cold churches. They were strong partisans of the American Revolution. They recognized the spirit of Calvin in the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence. Over in London the whole thing sounded like a Presbyterian rebellion... One of our ministers rushed into his church and ripped pages out of the hymnbooks to use as musket wadding and said "Give 'em Watts, boys," referring to Isaac Watts, hymnwriter.

The group that met in Phildelphia in 1789 understood that it was time to think anew. The presiding officer was John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. To show his support of the order which was emerging, Witherspoon and several of the others had stopped wearing their wigs in 1776. Thirteen years earlier he had signed his name to the Declaration of Independence, just two blocks down the street, the only clergyman to do so.

Witherspoon preached the sermon, then presided as the Assembly elected one of its own as Moderator, John Rodgers. Historians sometimes like to note the similarities between Presbyterian Church structure and the Federal Government. In fact two years earlier, in the same city, meetings were held just two blocks apart in which the concepts were hammered out which resulted in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the structure of the National Presbyterian Church. The central issue for both groups was the matter of authority: who gets it, how it is to be exercised and how limited or controlled. Both chose a strong central authority, but limited by checks and balances and local autonomy: neither a monarchy, king nor bishops, which they had enough of, nor a pure democracy - but something in between, a Republic.

Condensed

And then the Presbyterians went to work. They appointed a few missionaries to organize churches on the frontier: they commissioned several representatives to open discussions with other Christian churches, they had a fierce argument about a hymnal, they discussed the schools and colleges they had founded and they composed a letter to the President of the United States, George Washington. Calvinists that they were, they presumed not only to speak to their congregations, they spoke for the church to the world, always very risky business. "We ought not to forget our consequence in the Republic," they said. It is one of our traditions.

there are 3 m. of us in 11,600 congregations

Presbyterian values have been like seasoning in the larger context of American culture. We have never been as prominent numerically as we were in 1789, but we have always been a critical minority, a lively source of flavor for the rest of the culture: (the source of my concern.!)

-Education, for instance. It had its source in our early notion that lay people should not have to depend on anyone to tell them what was in the Bible, so it was imperative that people read and understand. Calvinists dominated both private and public education, founding two-thirds of all the colleges and universities prior to the Civil War: Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, by New England Congregationalists, and by the Presbyterians themselves: Princeton, Lafayette, Hampden-Sydney, Washington and Lee, Stillman, Lewis and Clarke, Davidson, Maryville, Wooster, Lake Forest, Wabash, Hanover, Monmouth, Muskingum, Macalester... Many state universities were started by Presbyterians: University of Delaware, University of Tennessee, Miami University, University of Michigan.

- #1 current problem facing our nation

-The deliberative process as a fairly dependable way to establish consensus and thereby the basis for responsible people to live together. Presbyterian Ethicist, Don Shriver, said in a discussion of the abortion debate, and the other ethical dilemmas lurking in the near future such as genetic engineering, that we must recover the tradition of careful deliberation and compromise - instead of the currently fashionable approach

of confrontation followed by shouting at one another through bull horns, utterly unwilling to grant that the other side's position may have some merit.

-The intersection of religion and life, there from the beginning. It is expressed in a centuries' old pattern of doing good in the world - which by some odd logic is spurned today so that "do-gooder" is a criticism rather than a compliment... Presbyterian hospitals, nursing homes, residences for the elderly, 28 Presbyterian homes for children in trouble. We are "do-gooders."

-And of course, that matter of "God alone as Lord of the conscience";... It has often made us dissenters. Calvin and Knox were dissenters; they did not live easily with the establishment. One of our earliest preachers was thrown in jail for preaching in New York without a license and we've been doing it ever since. Elijah Parish Lovejoy was a Presbyterian editor of a St. Louis newspaper, burned out by a pro-slavery mob and later killed by another mob in Alton, Illinois for his anti-slavery editorializing. Henry Van Dyke risked his prestige and reputation by voicing a lonely protest against the Spanish-American War. Bill Coffin did the same during Viet Nam. No Presbyterian my age or older was not asked at least once during the sixties if he/she would ever engage in civil disobedience and often lost career opportunities, because in conscience no son or daughter of John Calvin can ever say "no" to that. ~~Alan Boesak's~~ challenge to apartheid is perhaps the most serious one of all because it is based on a clearly Calvinist foundation which, after all the economic, sociological and geo-political arguments have been aired, simply cannot accommodate itself to a system in which authority and power is exercised by 20% of the people over the 80% who have no rights.

-And because we know about sin - including our own - a long standing value has been toleration, openness. We are willing to admit our mistakes, a refusal to take ourselves too seriously, because we know in our hearts that God alone is sovereign. Even at our most belligerent we never claimed to be the only church, the only answer to the truth, or the only way to worship or express the faith.

I submit that the world needs those values which have been born and nurtured by the Presbyterian family - which brings me to the recent Time Magazine article [5/15/89], "Those Mainline Blues," and ~~the fact that we have lost members, are losing members and that~~ we are not, apparently, what we used to be. We have, of course, been wringing our hands over the sad state of religion from the beginning as well. In 1777 the Synod of New York and Philadelphia solemnly noted the "declining state of religion and the abounding of iniquity."

Time solemnly noted that we are down 25%, the United Church of Christ 20%, the Episcopalians 28%; even the Methodists are down 18%. Our best minds are exploring the change. In addition to Time Magazine, the Lily Foundation is funding a major study of the decline of mainline religions. Martin Marty is helpful by suggesting that maybe we haven't changed so much as the culture has changed around us. i.e., that the mainstream of the culture has moved and that to be faithful to our own

identity we should not be obsessed with finding the new mainstream so that we can dive back into it.

We have lost members - a million in twenty years; but there are two facts about us which are important to acknowledge. The first is that since 1960 Presbyterians have not been having enough babies. Some of us have done our duty, but currently we aren't coming close to replenishing the supply of Presbyterians by birth, nor does it seem likely that we will or should. That isn't true for everyone in the Christian family. Not making new Presbyeterians, lowering the birth rate and limiting population is an honored Presbyterian value.

The other fact is that we are old. We've been around a long time. Our churches are old, in old neighborhoods, ~~full of aging people.~~ And that, by some ironic twist of logic, is not only not celebrated, but condemned as failure. There are many declining Presbyterian churches in urban areas. They have given their lives to the spiritual nurture of their neighborhoods which have changed very dramatically. They are still there, with declining numbers, aging congregation and leaking roofs. ~~Time made an unflattering and I thought unfair comparison between a downtown Presbyterian Church in Pasadena in which 80 elderly people worshipped and a booming suburban Church of the Nazarene on the edge of town. What we forget is that the~~ dear aging Presbyterian congregation was there, faithfully caring for its members and its neighborhood, for decades; ~~that~~ Presbyterian churches were there centuries before the new, fast-growing churches were even born and ~~that~~ it is part of our values to remain there. The 80 aging parishioners in downtown ~~Pasadena~~ are important. They are ours. They should have a church. So we will remain there and in the changing, declining neighborhoods, faithfully in ministry, creating programs to deal with a variety of human needs that simply don't exist anywhere else. And it will drain our resources to do it. May I suggest that instead of criticizing, instead of regarding declining urban neighborhood churches as failures, we should be cheering for them, thanking God for them, and regarding them as great successes - if the criteria of success is something other than big numbers, big budgets, big buildings.

May we be reminded, ~~on this 200th anniversary,~~ of one of the most difficult lessons for anyone who loves this wonderful entrepreneurial culture of ours, namely that the church of Jesus Christ is not called to be successful, but to be faithful, whether or not that means successful: may we be reminded that sometimes failing, by the culture's standards, means succeeding by our Lord's standards, that our Lord himself was crucified, not elected Chancellor of Jerusalem; that the whole point seems to be redemption through suffering, strength through weakness; and that when God's people start allowing the world to set the agenda and to define what success means we have fallen into a very serious trap of idolatry; for which the prophets of Israel had a very graphic description: "whoring after Babylon," they called it.

In the meantime it is tempting to look to the past only. Presbyterian journalist, Vic Jameson warns that, "It is safe to say that every generation since Adam has looked back wistfully at the good old days." [Presbyterian Survey, June 1988] The fifties, for instance, before

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Civil Rights and Angela Davis and the turmoil and stress of the sixties. ~~Our text today could not be clearer on that topic.~~ But God calls us to look ahead — not behind.

Jesus knew the religious tradition of the past... about ritual hand-washing. He chose to break with it. When the orthodox religionists challenged him he put it very plainly... "You leave the commandment of God and hold fast to human traditions."

There is within the Gospel of Jesus Christ a permanent discomfort with the status quo, the establishment, the "tradition," even religious tradition. It is part of the genius of Presbyterianism, even while it is celebrating its own traditions, to know that, and therefore, to lean into the future with hope.

— to Conclusion —

The Time article ended enigmatically and wrongly, I thought.

It said: "Perhaps, then, mainline churches are being cast into a role... not unlike that of the European refugees who are known to history as Pilgrims and Puritans." That was right I thought. If we were mainline, we are better suited not to be. We are, by nature, a minority, always slightly at odds with the establishment, always proposing a counter-culture, an alternative value system.

But then, this conclusion... "Unlike their 17th century predecessors, they have no New World to conquer."

That is wrong. Part of who we are as Presbyterians in this culture is a people who are not interested in conquering, but are absolutely committed to living faithfully and thoroughly in the New World that is most certainly emerging.

We have work to do. We have new churches to build and old ones to love and nurture.

We have declining churches and big, healthy, growing churches and there are still three million of us.

We have the grace to laugh at ourselves and the maturity to know that God's church can never be a pious enclave.

We have a tradition of passionate love for God and God's world and God's Kingdom of peace, and justice and compassion and freedom.

We have a lot going for us. Even though you and I won't see it, my strong sense is that there will be plenty of lively, contentious, caring and bright Presbyterians around to celebrate a Tricentennial, and that a goodly congregation will be sitting right here, on May 21, 2089... in the 313th year of the Independence of the United States of America.